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Airlines' Cuts Making Cities No-Fly Zones

By MICHELINE MAYNARD

Correction Appended

Earlier this decade, city officials in Hagerstown, Md., started making the case to build a longer runway at their airport to lure service by regional jets, instead of the turboprop planes that provided its only flights.

Several years and \$61.4 million later, the city opened its concrete welcome mat, a new 7,000 foot runway, last November — two months after the airport lost scheduled air service altogether.

Despite its costly investment, a dogged marketing effort by local officials and even help from Congress, the airport has had no luck attracting a new carrier, as the industry struggles under soaring fuel prices.

"Could we pick a worse time to go out and get commercial service? Probably not," said Carolyn Motz, director of the Hagerstown Regional Airport, which had 10 daily flights a decade ago.

The airports have grown quiet in many other communities, too.

Financially strapped airlines are cutting service, and nearly 30 cities across the United States have seen their scheduled service disappear in the last year, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. Others include Wilmington, Del.; Lake Havasu City, Ariz.; and Boulder City, Nev.

Over the same period, more than 400 airports, in cities large and small, have seen flight cuts. Over all, the number of scheduled flights in the United States dropped 3 percent in May, or 22,900 fewer flights than in May 2007, according to the Official Airline Guide.

And the service cuts are far from over, as jet fuel prices rise, airlines shut down and companies consider mergers, like the Delta-Northwest deal.

For American travelers, the shift means that they can no longer bank on scheduling flights to reach their destination within a single day, said Robert W. Mann Jr., an industry consultant in Port Washington, N.Y.

"Everybody expects frequent, convenient, high-quality service with great connectivity to the rest of the world," Mr. Mann said. But given the steep rise in fuel prices, which are up 84.5 percent from a year ago, airlines have to make difficult choices on service.

Fewer passengers are expected to fly this summer, traditionally the peak season for air travel — partly because of the soft economy, of course, but the difficulty of traveling may also be a factor.

The Air Transport Association, an industry trade group, predicts 211.5 million people will fly between June 1 and Aug. 31, down more than 2 million passengers from last year's record of 213.5 million.

Flights seem to be disappearing by the day.

Last week, Mesa Air Lines, a regional carrier based in Phoenix, said it would shut down Air Midwest, a regional subsidiary, on June 30. The move will eliminate service to 16 small cities in the 10 remaining states where Air Midwest, which had already cut flights, still operated.

Eliminating flights is the latest move by the airlines in a cost-cutting drive that also has led to ticket prices climbing 10 times this year and new fees, from charges for checking extra bags to changing itineraries.

Almost every major carrier, from American Airlines to Delta Air Lines and US Airways, is crossing cities off its list, leaving passengers with fewer choices than a year ago.

Some travelers have no choices, but it is not for lack of trying by city and state officials. After Hagerstown briefly lost its eligibility for a government program called the Essential Air Service last year, Maryland's Congressional delegation helped win an extension that allowed Hagerstown, as well as Lancaster, Pa., and Brookings, S.D., to remain in the program until Sept. 30.

The Essential Air Service program was created in 1978, when the airline industry was deregulated, to ensure that communities in rural and remote areas would be linked to the nation's air system.

Under the program, the government provides subsidies of about \$100 million a year to the

airlines, resulting in service to 102 communities.

But the subsidies have not risen fast enough to cover the jump in jet fuel costs, and passengers have resisted paying higher prices for plane tickets, prompting carriers to pull out of a number of cities, including Hagerstown.

Now, some lawmakers are pushing for more money for the air service program as part of a broader funding bill for the Federal Aviation Administration that is before the Senate. The House passed the measure last year.

Even with the longer runway, and the federal subsidy, Hagerstown has not been able to persuade another carrier to take the place of Air Midwest, which discontinued its two daily flights to Pittsburgh last fall.

Ms. Motz says that is now unlikely to happen before the extension expires, given the time an airline needs to start new service. "With airlines going out of business and capacity being reduced, it is very difficult," she said.

Lacking flights, Hagerstown residents must drive an hour and a half to Baltimore-Washington International Airport, or face even longer trips to Washington's two airports.

Without passenger service, the airport's revenue comes primarily from military and private aviation.

"We would love to have service here, especially since there have been millions of dollars in improvements," said Lewis Metzner, a city council member.

Plattsburgh, N.Y., is also hoping to get more flights. And it has more than just a longer runway — it has a brand new airport, built on a former air force base.

The airport offers three flights a day on a nine-seat Cessna to Boston, via Cape Air, as well as three flights a week to South Carolina on Myrtle Beach DirectAir and four weekly flights to Fort Lauderdale and Orlando on Allegiant, a low-fare carrier.

Plattsburgh had a daily flight to Albany under CommutAir, a commuter carrier linked to Continental Airlines that operated 19-seat aircraft. But CommutAir discontinued service to Plattsburgh last year, before the airport moved to its new location.

Now, the town's only current connection to a major airline is through Cape Air, which has partnership arrangements with Continental and JetBlue.

Cape Air service is provided under an Essential Air Service contract that gives Cape Air with a subsidy of \$650 a flight, or about \$73 a passenger for a trip that costs \$94 one-way, said Christopher D. Kreig, the airport's manager.

But the subsidies have not ensured stability. Cape Air is the third airline in a year to hold the contract. After CommutAir pulled out, Big Sky Airlines served Plattsburgh for just seven weeks, leaving in January, when the airline dropped service to East Coast airports.

However, Myrtle Beach and Allegiant came in without government assistance, attracted in part by the airport's proximity to Canada, which Plattsburgh emphasizes in its marketing campaign.

Mr. Kreig acknowledges the service is an odd mix for Plattsburgh's passengers.

But Mr. Mann, the industry consultant, sees only one way that small cities like Plattsburgh can attract new business — and it is probably one that passengers will not like. "You can profitably fly small airplanes only if the people on them pay very high prices," he said.

Mary M. Chapman contributed reporting.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 27, 2008

An article on Wednesday about cutbacks in airline service to American cities erroneously included a city among those where scheduled service disappeared in the last year. New Haven, Conn., does indeed have regularly scheduled service. (US Airways has flights at Tweed New Haven Regional Airport.) The article also described incorrectly Myrtle Beach DirectAir's thrice-weekly service at Plattsburgh, N.Y. The airline offers service to South Carolina, not North Carolina.

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